

At the Crossroads of Memories

The Role of Memory in Training Activities in the Balkans

This article expresses solely the views of the author and in no way speaks for the institution for which he works.

It is difficult to have one's own modest, uncertain say on the Balkans. With newspaper articles, reports and eyewitness accounts, works of history and literature, thousands of pages have been produced on the subject. So why do I wish to add a few lines of my own? I am not from that region of Europe. I was born in France, a country regarded as democratic – so I have no experience of living under a totalitarian regime at any time of my life – and whose last war, the Algerian war, a war that took 30 years to say its name, was over one year before I was born. I do not know what it is like, therefore, to live through a war or in the aftermath of one. As a man, I have never been under social pressure to go and fight "for my country"; I do not live in a ruined city, I know nothing of being a student and having to take part in "mineriads" (when the Romanian miners from the Jiu valley descended violently on Bucharest to "teach the students a lesson" in 1993 and again in 1994), nothing of societies on the brink of civil war; none of that features in my own historical experience. So mine is a statement, a thought from "outside", from elsewhere; a statement from what can be but a thin voice in the crowd, no certitudes, just suggestions.

What I intend to look at here is the question of how to deal with upsetting, painful memories within seminars or training activities for members of youth organisations and for officials responsible for youth matters in the Balkans. In the first, more narrative section, this entails presenting what I have to say in the form of short "stories" or scenes from real life. I will then confront those experiences with current thinking on memory and collective memory – an important social building block - in the historical or philosophical spheres and analyse them from an intercultural point of view. Finally I will suggest a few practical pointers for training which, I hope, might be of use to all those working in the youth field in the Balkans.

by Jean-Philippe Restoueix



One preliminary remark: I will not use the term "South-East Europe" when speaking of the Balkans for more than one reason. Firstly, saying "South-East Europe" in this context means that our vision of Europe is above all that of the "European Union", i.e. mainly the west and north-west of the continent. The real south-east of Europe is the Caucasus. Secondly, the concept of "South-East Europe" has been forged and used as if people were frightened to speak of the Balkans, as if using that word cast the subject in a negative light. In this linguistic mask there is a kind of belief stemming from either naivety or political correctness that changing the name of things changes the things themselves. But it also implies not respecting the things, landscapes or people concerned. No one likes to be called by a name that is not theirs. So, as far as possible, with no judgement on my part but every effort to avoid that all-too infamous "western arrogance" (seen most recently, following the terrible terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, when Americans ran to their flag it was seen as "patriotism!" Any Balkans people reacting in the same way, and it's seen as: "nationalism!"), the term "Balkans" here refers above all to the peninsula which, from the Adriatic to the Black Sea, reaches out into the Mediterranean, and the peoples who live there with their own historical experiences. I am talking of a meeting place between religions, between alphabets; of arid

mountain landscapes and green pastures, forested hills, enclosed valleys and narrow coastal strips, a land of legends and epics, a land of bards and rhymers ... that is what must be seen and heard when the reader sees the name "Balkans".

I. A few words

The experiences underlying these thoughts are above all the different training courses and seminars organised within the framework of Council of Europe assistance programmes in the youth sector and encounters in that context. It is difficult to say how much of this is professional, public or private experience. I am not divided into compartments, and any experience, in whatever context, is a human experience, a meeting with others. Nevertheless, the persons concerned will be designated only by their initials in order to respect their story and their memories, many of which are intensely personal. For the author, they all have a face; the reader can draw in the features that spring to mind. So let me first "recount" albeit briefly, in a series of flashes, those little scenes.

Mostar, 1999. The Muslim call to prayer wafts into the meeting room. A Bosnian Serb gives an involuntary shudder of irritation and discomfort. He does not like that sound. Later on

during the course, both he and a Bosnian Croat will admit to having fought on the front line, in the same place, at the same time, each in a different army, feeling confident enough to reveal this to the group.

Albania. "My father was sentenced to prison for political reasons", "... and it was my father who sent him to prison". Neither I nor the other team member present knew what to say or how to react. We thought that it was something of an unfunny joke, a quip in bad taste before finding out, at the end of the course, that they had simply been telling the truth.

Another course in Albania. The team had requested a private discussion with three participants known to be from families "marked out by the party". Under the Hoxha regime, these were families of which at least one member had been imprisoned or persecuted for political reasons. K., R. and U. agreed to tell their story. We were shut in a room, three members of the team, a young interpreter and them.

K.'s grandfather had been a respected imam. In 1945 he had been captured by the communists who buried him alive to force him to say where he had hidden his gold. The experience drove him insane. His family was marked out by the party. The children were not allowed to go to university and the family lived in constant fear of eviction. To enable his younger sister to study, K.'s parents decided to divorce so that the wife could claim to have broken her ties with these "enemies". K. is now an angry young man, a man who has had part of his childhood stolen from him.

R.'s uncle had protested in 1956 against the invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops. He was arrested on the spot and sent to a village of exile. His family had their cards marked by the party. In R.'s home no one spoke of his uncle who had "brought a curse on the family", it was as if he was dead; because of him, various members of the family lost their jobs and others fled to Greece. R. is waiting for revenge: "I am compiling files on everyone who persecuted our family. One day, when justice has to be done, I will use them to tip the scales."

U.'s story is even worse, tragic in its proportions. Her grandfather had been tortured and died in prison. The family had not been able to recover the body. In order to protect U., her family entrusted her to a friend. But the friend too was arrested and tortured, and U. can still see that martyred body now. Today, U. wants the cycle of violence and hatred to end, a halt to the vicious circle of pain.

At the end of that long evening we were all exhausted, wiped out, crushed by this excess of suffering and pain. The interpreter was shattered because translating pain means taking on the burden to the point of complete exhaustion.

A strange place for an encounter, one October night in **Brcko**, outside a bar. I. had noticed the group and wanted to engage in discussion. Initially I refused but then accepted. Our conversation was to last over two hours. I. was a 28 year-old Bosnian Croat. He despises himself: "You think I'm a waster, eh?" No, I. is suffering and cannot find his place in society. During the war his parents took refuge in Germany and prevented him from going to fight, from going to defend his country and his honour as a man... Since then I. has found life and living difficult,

looking on himself as a pathetic coward.

G. is an **Albanian from Kosovo**. Late one afternoon, he described what ten years of not legally existing in his own country had been like for him: banned from speaking his own language, frightened to state his nationality, fearful of going out in the evening and running into young people of the other nationality who would threaten him and his wife. He spoke for over half an hour without once naming those other people: "they", "them", "their" ... I pointed this out. "That's the problem. I don't know what to call them..."

J. is a young **Serb living in Belgrade**. When she spoke of the monasteries in Kosovo, she feared that she might never see them again, that they would be destroyed or made inaccessible.

There were plenty more "scenes" like these ones. My memory is teeming with other faces and other encounters. I would like to go on talking about them and bear witness to their story, but I think you have heard enough and already suspect where my thoughts will be straying.

II. Memory, history, forgetting ...

The experiences related here are firstly based on the word of the witness/protagonist telling their stories, but they are nevertheless part of history in the making. It is not a matter of judging the truthfulness of their words – it is possible that they are not telling the truth or the whole truth or they are lying by omission or design – for even if they did not say exactly what had happened, they were passing on their own representation of it, which finds its level within our ability to grasp reality, even if it looks like a Cubist painting.

What makes these words even more difficult to hear and listen to (listening here meaning an active process of receiving words from another person), is that they ring with enormous pain, bitterness or anger. And they are all the harder to say because, on the whole, the different societies concerned are not always ready to hear them, as if the weight of these memories prevented the future from existing.

In terms of living experience, these stories reflect a number of contemporary historical or philosophical questions. From the trail-blazing "La mémoire collective" by Maurice Halbwachs, which remained without a successor for nearly twenty years, to the thoughts of Paul Ricoeur on "La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli", taking in the monument built under the foremanship of Pierre Nora, "Lieux de mémoire", on the way, the question is indeed one of the relationship between memory and history and of dealing with painful recollections.

Historians have all too often neglected memory, the statement of the witness, the victim, dismissing their words as unreliable, subject to too many outside, non-scientific factors in favour of sacrosanct documentary evidence, and in doing so overlooking the fact that it is men and women, through their everyday life and experiences, who have made history, without necessarily recounting it; history as a perpetual movement of understanding the past and as a potential key to building the future. Listening

